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Viewing cable 06QUITO2384, ECUADOR-COLOMBIA BORDER PROGRESS REPORT -

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| Reference ID | Created | Released | Classification | Origin |
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SUBJECT: ECUADOR-COLOMBIA BORDER PROGRESS REPORT -

JUNE-SEPTEMBER

REF: A. QUITO 02078

1B. QUITO 02151

1C. QUITO 02289

Classified By: PolOffJarahnHillsman, Reasons 1.4 (b&d)

11. (C) Summary: The following report provides a quarterly update of developments along Ecuador's northern border with Colombia. Highlights include the Ambassador's travel to Esmeraldas province, progress disrupting narco-trafficking, a change of Defense Minister, and renewed diplomatic tension over an errant mortar attack from Colombia which injured three Ecuadorian civilians. End Summary.

Ambassador Highlights Development in Esmeraldas

12. (C) The Ambassador visited the province of Esmeraldas on June 30 to inaugurate a USAID funded water system in the town of Borbon, and to express continued USG support for basic infrastructure projects in vulnerable northern border communities. In public and private the Ambassador stressed the importance of investing in basic sanitation and health projects, as well as licit income generating ventures. USAID, by 30 September will have completed 36 water and sanitation systems, bringing much needed basic services to populations along the troubled northern border with Colombia.

13. (U) The Ambassador on June 16 signed an agreement with Foreign Minister Carrion adding 10.5 million in FY06 ACI funds for northern border development. Carrion told the press that "the Ecuadorian government appreciates U.S. assistance for the most abandoned areas of Ecuador...which reflects how the two countries are united to develop vulnerable zones in the northern border."

Progress Disrupting Narco-Trafficking

14. (C) The Ecuadorian National Police (ENP) Anti-Narcotics Unit discovered and destroyed 10 hectares of coca plants over the last six months, the majority of which were found in the Esmeraldas province. The ENP Anti-Narcotics Unit carried out eradication with military force protection, a major indication that police-military counter-narcotics cooperation is improving. Meanwhile, maritime interdiction efforts resulted in the capture of 20 metric tons of cocaine in September alone. The Ecuadorian military seized over 160,000 gallons of petroleum ether (white gas) between 01 July and 13 September. Petroleum ether is an organic solvent used in the manufacturing of cocaine in Colombia. Information provided by DEA's Ecuador office led to the seizure of 319 kilos in a cargo container in Bridge Port, Bahamas and 200 Kilos in Mumbai, India, the largest such bust ever made there.

15. (SBU) Conclusion of the NAS funded San Lorenzo pier in the northern province of Esmeraldas has been delayed due to contracting problems (now set for December/January 2007). The \$2.7 million dollar investment will greatly improve the Ecuadorian Navy's ability to monitor and interdict narcotics traffickers in an area where we have seen a significant increase in activity. Narco-traffickers are currently moving drugs into Ecuador on speed boats and connecting with larger vessels off the Esmeraldas coast. Drugs are also being smuggled through San Lorenzo's extensive riverine and estuarine networks. Completion of this project will be good news for our counter-narcotics efforts in the region.

IAG Activity Persists

16. (C) Colombian Illegal Armed Group (IAG) activity in Ecuadorian territory, mainly in the Carchi and Sucumbios provinces, is on the rise. We have seen an increase in IAG movement in this region as well as in the number of Colombian

sympathizers and local residents entangled in illegal activity. In response, the Ecuadorian military executed two very large operations (approximately 1500 personnel) in Sucumbios, disrupting FARC activity in that sector. Ecuadorian-Colombian military cooperation at the tactical level remains very positive, helping to deny FARC and other narco-terrorist free reign in the northern border region. Unfortunately, aside from the anti-narcotics units, police in the region remain understaffed, underfunded, and corruption within the ranks a persistent problem.

Cross-Border Relations Positive But Tense

17. (C) Ecuador-Colombia cross-border cooperation and communication remains positive despite several border incidents over the last four months. Director General for Border Relations with Colombia Ambassador Claudio Cevallos recently expressed GOE concern that FARC sympathizers in the northern border region are actively trying to undermine GOE efforts to deepen cross-border development and security initiatives. Cevallos explained that the GOE has information that the FARC through the press and local supporters is using hot-button issues like aerial fumigations on the Colombian side of the border and accidental Colombian military incursions to try and derail high-level government cooperation. Cevallos reported that many in the GOE are acutely aware of the FARC's activities and of the growing narco-terrorist threat and are working, within current political constraints, to address the problem. This may be the reason for the GOE's more muted response to accidental Colombian military incursions into Ecuador over the last few months. The GOE's more measured responses and the previously established bi-national committees have helped the two governments maintain fluid communication on a number of cross-border issues.

18. (C) The bilateral border development plan originally scheduled to be signed by the foreign ministers on September 7 was postponed due to scheduling conflicts. Cevallos reported that the signing would take place in mid-October.

Mortar Incident Tests Relations

19. (C) Improved cross-border relations were severely tested when a mortar round from a Colombian military-FARC fire exchange in Teteye, Putamayo exploded in the Ecuadorian town of Puerto Nuevo, Sucumbios on August 23. The explosion damaged a bus station and injured three Ecuadorian nationals. Public outrage spread quickly forcing the GOE to issue a strong public statement condemning the action and demanding an explanation and compensation for the injured. The Colombian government initially faulted the FARC and said that an investigation was underway, but after further GOE pressure announced that it would compensate the victims. However, the GOC response stopped short of any admission that the mortar originated from the Colombian military - a claim made by the GOE. Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Francisco Carrion told the Ambassador in a recent meeting that he phoned Colombian Foreign Minister Maria Araujo to encourage a speedy response given public discontent in Ecuador. Soon thereafter, according to Carrion, the GOC agreed to compensate the injured. Seeking to put the issue to bed, the GOE did not demand an actual admission of guilt on behalf of the Colombian military (reftel A).

White Paper Released; MinDef Resigns

10. (SBU) Former Defense Minister Oswaldo Jarrion on August 10 released the Ministry's "National Defense Policy 2006", citing the need to have a well defined strategy for addressing transnational crime and to protect national sovereignty. The "white paper" offers a significant shift in Ecuador's security policy, stressing the need to secure the country's northern border with Colombia and frustrate

narco-trafficker efforts in Ecuador (reftel B). Many criticized Jarrin for overstepping the military's role by suggesting increased counter-narcotics measures. Jarrin on August 28 announced his resignation, citing unspecified elements in opposition to the military's counter-narcotics role as forcing his unexpected exit. Newly appointed Defense Minister Marcelo Delgado has vowed to maintain efforts initiated under Jarrin, recently announcing that he would close and move 14 military bases from southern Ecuador to the northern border region (reftel C).

U.S. Military Support Limited But Effective

¶11. (U) The U.S. Military Group (MILGP) conducted a Medical Readiness Training Exercise July 13-29 in the northern border province of Esmeraldas. The U.S. military team performed 37 plastic surgery operations, repairing cleft lip and palates and severe burns. The humanitarian exercise was well received by local residents and received positive press coverage. The MILGP also recently provided 12,000 back-packs with school kits for distribution in select school districts along on the northern border, and has additional kits ready for distribution.

¶12. (C) The MILGP currently has a U.S. Army Special Forces Team training select Ecuadorian military units in the northern provinces of Esmeraldas and Sucumbios on light infantry tactics. To increase the Ecuadorian military's operational capabilities, the MILGP supplied northern border units with 195 night observation devices. MILGP funding also helped the Ecuadorian military produce and disseminate 84,000 informational packets in support of their weapons control initiative. The same program provided funding that allowed the Ecuadorian Police to produce and disseminate 250,000 anti-drug informational products.

¶13. (C) A MILGP funded mobile radio station was successfully brought on-line in Maldonado, Carchi province. As the first Ecuadorian government radio station established in the area, the initiative will help counter the FARC dominated messages currently broadcasted. The radio station will play music and broadcast messages that support Ecuadorian national identity, discourage illicit activities, and promote the Ecuadorian military's positive role in the region.

"JUNTOS" Campaign Hits Primetime

¶14. (U) USAID expanded its "JUNTOS" (together) campaign, adding an additional \$500,000 in funding. The new messages hit radio and TV news programs in late August, and over 24 2-minute infomercials will appear on TV news programs into October. USAID also secured agreements with newspapers, magazines, and credit card companies to include "JUNTOS" information in their mass mailings. The GOE financed the cost of "JUNTOS" commercial spots played during the 2006 World Cup. Worth an estimated \$200,000 in free advertising, the spots reached 80% of the Ecuadorian population. The "JUNTOS" campaign is quickly gaining recognition and should help to better highlight USG development activities in the northern border region.

Poor Sanitation Linked to NB Health Problems

¶15. (U) An important new study was completed documenting the health impact of water and sanitation in northern border communities. Nine communities where USAID had funded water and sanitation improvements were compared to areas still lacking such investment. The report found a consistent correlation with improved health statistics and USAID funded water sanitation projects in the nine communities, and an even greater consensus among beneficiaries and health workers interviewed that these infrastructure improvements led to better health. This confirms our suspicions that health problems previously attributed to aerial glyphosate spraying are more likely connected to poor health care and limited

access to clean water and basic sanitation services.

Economic Development Slow But Steady

¶16. (U) Overall, jobs and income improved in the region as well. A total of 2,000 new hectares are ready to be planted with new cocoa plants from nurseries owned by farmers associations, increasing to more than 20,000 hectares. Approximately 500 farmers are completing a basic training on cocoa farming and post-harvest technologies through the highlight successful Farmers Field Schools. The Coffee Growers Cooperatives Association of Rio Intag (ACCRI) is collecting and processing arabica coffee beans to ship 400 quintals to Japan in early October 2006. Producers from the northern border Amazon provinces continue to export robusta beans to Colombia at favorable prices.

Comment

¶17. (C) The Ecuadorian government on balance continues to be a good partner in regional counter-narcotics and counter-terrorist fights. The Ecuadorian military and the Anti-Narcotics Unit are fully cooperative and open to U.S. regional objectives to combat international crime. The recently released "white paper" and Minister of Defense Delgado's vow to strengthen the military's security presence in the north to counter IAG activity and deny narcotics traffickers entry into Ecuador is another indication of a GOE focus on the nation's real security threats. Ecuador-Colombia military-to-military cooperation at the tactical level is also positive and supports USG regional objectives. We remain concerned, however, that military and anti-narcotics funding constraints continue to hinder greater engagement.

¶18. (C) High-level Ecuador-Colombian cross-border cooperation is improving, but remains fragile. Another Puerto Nuevo type incident could provide the FARC and anti-Plan Colombia elements ammunition to undermine bilateral political gains. Outrage here over the mortar explosion and what many view as empty promises by the Colombian government to avoid such incidents persists. With an agreement on monetary compensation for the Puerto Nuevo injured still pending, the incident remains subject to political manipulation. While it appears that the GOE's approach was measured and meant to quell public concern, it becomes harder to do so with each fresh incident.

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=====CABLE ENDS=====